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MAIMONIDES LETTER ON APOSTACY

The Advent of the Messiah and Shivat Zion (Return to Zion)

INTRODUCTION

The "Letter on Apostasy," *Iggeret ha-Shemad,* was the first public document written by Maimonides. It was written in 1160 or 1161, at least seven years before the completion of his first major work, "The Commentary on the Mishna" in 1168. He was approximately twenty-six years old when he wrote this famous letter in Arabic. He demonstrated his unique qualities of clarity or thought, searching analysis, skillful application of sources and scientific method on this work. Apart from these scholarly attributes the "Letter on Apostasy" placed Maimonides among the foremost authorities of his time as a dynamic champion of his people. He was at once the consummate scholar and the statesman in whose intellectual pursuits and steadfast courage the Jewish people found anchorage and hope.

The letter originated in the period between 1146-1165—a time of religious persecution in Morocco and Spain, provoked by a new sect of Mohammedans, the Almohades. The founder of the sect was Abdallah ibn Tumart, reputed to be a follower of the philosopher Al Gazali. He conceived an Islam dedicated to the Koran and the Sword. As a religious enthusiast, he was anxious to combat luxury in living and dress, and was against poetry, music and art. Stressing the superiority of Islam, he promulgated a unitarian confession of Faith—a highly abstract expression of God's Unity bordering on pantheism—which everyone was obliged to articulate. And as an ambitious politician he envisioned a world wide Islamic dominion ruled by the sword and Mohammedan law.

His ambition of initiating a spiritual reformation and political conquests came to fruition upon his demise when his disciple Abdulmumen became the "Emir al Mumsenin," "Prince of the Faithful." The dynasty of the Almoravides was uprooted after a prolonged siege in 1146 when Morocco fell into Abdulmumen's hands. To Jews and Christians the only alternatives were: death or apostasy.

In 1146 he called together the heads of the Jewish Community and said:

> "Your ancestors have not accepted Mohammed as the true prophet on the ground that your Messiah will appear five hundred years after the hegira,[1] the advent of Mohammed. The five hundred years have now elapsed and your Messiah has not appeared. Consequently, unless you will accept Mohammed as your prophet now we shall regard you as heretics and outcasts, forbidden to dwell in our land. Should you decide to remain here you have only one of two choices, either embrace Islam or death."

Subsequently, after some persuasion he agreed to give the Jews and Christians a third alternative namely, to leave the country.

Now, many of the Christians were able to find an asylum in Northern Spain among their correligionists — who, unlike the Moslems, opened the doors for their persecuted brethren. But the Jews had no refuge open to them. Many suffered martyrdom, and the majority agreed outwardly and uttered the Islamic formula of conversion, "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His Prophet." On some occasions they attended the Mosque. Secretly, however, they practiced the Jewish rites. They found encouragement in a "Letter of Consolation" writtn by Maimonides' father, Maimon, who exhorted them not to despair, for God had not forsaken them. The letter was full of warmth and emotion. It was like a soothing stream flowing over their wounded spirits.

There was, however, a Maghrib pietist residing in Fez who was not pleased with the lenient tone of Maimon's letter and decided to inquire of a foreign Rabbi to render an halakhic decision on this matter of pretended submission to Islam. The reply of this anonymous authority to the inquiry was quick, uncompromisingly harsh and diametrically opposed to Maimon's "Letter of Consolation." He declared that any Jew who publicly uttered the Moslem confession, although secretly performing all of Jewish precepts, could no longer be regarded as a Jew. The Moslems were idolaters and the only course for a steadfast Jew was not to submit to compulsion in any form but accept martyrdom.

This Responsum was widely circulated among the Northwestern African Jews and one can well imagine the panic and consternation it provoked. It was as if they were cast forth once again into the desert of despair. Some felt completely crushed under a burden of guilt and were persuaded to completely embrace Islam since they were regarded as apostates and outcasts

in Judaism. Maimonides was outraged by the intolerance and harsh judgment of the armchair critic. And, as if associating himself personally in the charge, he proceeded in the *Iggereth ha-Shemad* to combat the zealot with his own weapons. He began his work by chiding the rabbi for reaching conclusions in an unscholarly manner. To pass judgments, he stated, one has to formulate propositions that are supportable by patient research and empirical facts. His critic, he argued, has done neither but acted impulsively without ever investigating the circumstances.

Maimonides proceeded to get to the heart of the matter by examining the problem, first from an historical and then from an halakhic perspective. The over-all issue was *Kiddush ha-Shem* (Sanctification of the Holy Name) and its opposite *Chillul ha-Shem* (the desecration of the Holy Name). In this context one has to consider three dimensions: (1) the distinction between those who sin under compulsion and those who do so from sheer wickedness; (2) the distinction between transgressing the Law in action or in speech; and (3) how meritorious are the good works performed by the "Anusim" in secret? And do they deserve to be rewarded?

Maimonides brings to bear the testimony of history from Scriptures that Moses, Elijah and Isaiah were punished for inveighing against the innocent apostasy of Israel. As to the second issue he cites evidence in the Talmud that Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Eliezer feigned heathenism at a similar period of religious persecution to save their lives. Thirdly, Jewish history records that three wicked evildoers like Ahab, Eglon, King of Moab and Nebuchadnezer were rewarded for one single good deed despite their lives of wickedness. Should we not then conclude, says Maimonides, that good works performed in secret by our own forced pseudo-apostates will be rewarded.

Having examined those issues from an historical perspective, Maimonides addresses himself to the pure halakhic standpoint. He divides the issue into five main categories.

The first deals with the meaning of *Kiddush ha-Shem* with regard to the three capital offenses — idolatry, unchastity and murder. The second principle delineates the meaning of *Chillul ha-Shem* as a sin committed willfully out of a deliberate rejection of our religious duties toward God and toward our neighbors that will cast dishonor on our name. The third principle asserts that no Jewish Court can impose punishment in these cases where one has submitted to coercion instead of suffering martyrdom. The fourth category draws a difference between the present persecution and the previous ones in terms of transgressing the Law in action or speech. One is duty-bound, however, to leave those places at once and not wait for the Messiah

to lead us to Jerusalem. Finally, the fifth principle postulates what should be the state of mind of the forced pseudo-apostate with regard to being recompensed for the good deeds he performs.

This letter, which has been referred to also as *Maamer Kiddush ha-Shem,*[2] "A Treatise on the Sanctification of God's Name," had a tremendous impact on the persecuted Moroccan Jews. It saved them from complete apostasy. It animated their spirits and persuaded them not to forsake their faith and yield to Islamic allurements. Many abandoned their religious duplicity and lived openly and whole with God. Others, spurred on by Maimonides' admonition, decided to leave the hostile environment for the Holy Land. As to the Zealots and mystics, who falsely claimed that the return to the Holy Land was solely related to the advent of the Messiah, he exposed their hypocrisy and denounced their claims as a disguise for their avaricious instincts of trying to hold on to material possessions rather than venture out to a land where one may pursue the laws of God in freedom and peace. Halakhically and historically, he argued, the observance of the Law[3] and the return to the land are independent of the appearance of the Messiah. The advent of messianism will serve simply to usher in a period of tranquility when we shall be able to devote more time and energy to our intellectual pursuits and spiritual perfection. This shift of emphasis from a Messiah-centered Judaism permeating and directing the currents of Jewish life and values to a Torah-oriented faith constituted one of the major contributions of Maimonides to Jewish history.

As to the technical aspects of this letter, it is important to note that the original Arabic text was lost. It was translated into Hebrew by an unknown translator and printed for the first time by Abraham Geiger in 1850 from a Munich manuscript. Another printing appeared in 1856 in Koenigsberg by Zvi Hirsh Edelman in his work *Hemdah Genuzah* from a Bodlein manuscript. A third edition appeared in Leipzig in 1860 by Lichtenberg in his *Kobez Teshubot ha-Rambam V'Iggerotoith.* In the last edition the letter was entitled *Maamer Kiddush ha-Shem.*

In addition to the *Kobez,* the works of Joseph Kafih "Iggerot" and Mordecai Dov Rabinowitz, "Iggert ha-Rambam" are crucial to an elucidation of the text and the sequence of this epistle.

Following is my translation of the final sections of the letter which to my mind contain in a condensed form states the essence of the entire epistle. Translations of the first part will appear in a subsequent issue of *TRADITION.*

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Letter on Apostacy

The fourth category deals with the difference between the present religious persecution[4] and previous experiences and what steps to take to combat it. You should know that the previous persecutions in the days of the sages, our people were called upon to transgress the Law in action as the Talmud relates:[5]

> They were forbidden to engage in the study of the Torah; the laws of circumcision were proscribed and they were coerced into unclean cohabitation.

But during this period of religious persecution we are not forced to perform any acts of apostasy but just to recite an empty formula. And if one wishes to practice the six hundred and thirteen precepts in secret, he can do so without punishment[6] unless he voluntarily desecrates the Sabbath. For this form of compulsion requires no action but the recital of a simple formula which the Moslems themselves know were uttered insincerely only to circumvent the King's whims.

Verily, one who preferred to suffer martyrdom in order not to pronounce the Mohammedan confession, has done nobly and well and his reward is great before the Lord. He may be regarded as supremely virtuous as he was willing to surrender his life for the sanctification of the name of God, Blessed be He.[7] Shoud one, however, inquire of me: "Shall I be slain or pronounce the Mohammedan confession," my answer would be: "Utter the formula and live!" To be sure one should not continue to live in such an environment but until the opportunity presents itself to leave one should be confined to the privacy of his home and conduct his transactions in secret. For this kind of apostasy directed exclusively at compelling verbal confession is unique. Our rabbis contention of "better to suffer death than to commit a transgression" was never meant to imply a single transgression without action. Their reference is only to a transgression in action which involves positive precepts and prohibitions (negative precepts).

In this period of religious persecution, I should like therefore

to propose several modes of behavior incumbent upon us. It is first of all important to focus our attention upon any of the precepts we are still capable of observing. Notwithstanding the fact that we may be forced to commit many serious transgressions such as the desecration of some crucial laws of the Sabbath, this should not preclude the possibility of observing less significant laws, such as carrying forbidden articles on the Sabbath.[8] Let no one say: "Is not the law that I transgressed of greater significance than the one I observed?" It is our responsibility to be scrupulous about any law no matter how slight as long as we are capable of observing it.

Moreover, it is incumbent upon all of us to know this fundamental doctrine of our faith, namely, that Jeroboam b. Nabot and others like him were as prone to punishment for a light transgression, such as the elimination of the practice of "ereb dishes,"[9] and similar observances as for the grave iniquity of fashioning a golden calf. For the rule that punishment for a severe transgression obviates punishment for an insignificant violation[10] applies only to matters pertaining to human justice, but the Almighty meets out punishment or reward equally to stringent as well as light actions. Accordingly, one should be aware that, contrary to the contention of our anonymous critic, every violation committed calls for due punishment and every precept duly performed is subject to reward.

However, the crucial advice I wish to give to myself and to those I admire and to those who seek my opinion is to leave those places of hostility and go to a location where one could fulfill the Law without compulsion and fear. We should even forsake our homes and children and all our possessions for the Divine Law we inherited means more for the prudent than all ephemeral possessions. The latter will disappear but the fear of God remains.

Moreover, even if we had two Jewish communities,[11] one of which superior to the other, in the promotion of good deeds, well established customs and strict observance of the *mitzvot*, it would still be incumbent upon a God-fearing man to leave the inferior for the superior community. Concerning this matter our sages cautioned us: "One must not dwell in a place that

does not have ten saintly individuals."[12] They derive this admonition from the Sodom experience as we read, "Preadventure there will be found there ten, And he said, I will not destroy for the sake of the ten" (Gen. 18:32). If this is true with regard to a Jewish location, how much more does it devolve upon us to make every effort, no matter at what peril, to leave a hostile, non-Jewish place where religious practices cannot be observed properly and move to a more favorable location.

Our prophets[13] have already indicated that one who dwells among disbelievers is like them as King David said: "Because they have driven me out this day so that I cannot attach myself on the inheritance of the Lord, saying, go serve other gods" (I Samuel 26:19). Dwelling among heathens is thus compared to the worship of idols. The saintly and God-fearing were likewise wont to repudiate the evil deed as well as its perpetrator and to be attached to the good deed and its doer. King David said: "Behold those that hate thee, I ever hate, O Lord; and for those who rise up against thee do I feel loathing" (Ps. 139:21); "An associate am I unto all that fear thee and unto those that keep thy precepts" (Ps. 119:63). Similarly our patriarch Abraham rejected his family and birthplace and escaped to save his soul from the influence of disbelievers.

Clearly, this advice to emigrate from a hostile environment applies only in cases where we are not coerced to transgress the Law in action. Should we, however, be compelled to physically violate any of the precepts, we are actually forbidden to remain in that place even to the point of leaving all of our possessions behind and search by day and night for a more suitable environment for the practice of our faith which hopefully we are apt to find somewhere in this wide world. The routine excuses one usually offers about the propriety of one's home and children are no authentic justification for remaining in a hostile location. Compare, "No one can in any wise redeem his brother; nor can he give to God redemption money" (Ps. 49:8). Accordingly, I have no patience with one who offers those excuses in order to assuage his conscience, but it is imperative that he migrate to a favorable environment and under no circumstances remain in a place of apostasy. Any one who persists in staying in a

hostile location, is guilty of almost willfully desecrating God's name.

However, the position of those who are seduced into remaining in their places until the advent of the Messiah in the West[14] who will lead them to Jerusalem is the most untenable of all. I do not understand how this will relieve them of their present state of apostasy. In the meantime, they are guilty and cause others to transgress the Law. Concerning them the prophet decries: "And they heal the breach of the daughters of my people very lightly saying, peace, peace, when there is no peace" (Jer. 8:11). For indeed there is no definite time assigned for the appearance of the Messiah and no one can state with any assurance whether his coming will be in the near future or at some remote period.

Moreover, the obligation to observe the Divine precepts has no relation to the appearance of the Messiah: We are duty bound at all times to engage in the study of the Torah and observe the Law and make every attempt to observe it assiduously. If after we have fulfilled our religious duties, God would grant us and our offspring the privilege of witnessing the advent of the Messiah, it would be exceedingly gratifying. Otherwise we have lost nothing but gained the satisfaction of complying with our religious responsibility. But should one persist in remaining in such a place until the appearance of the Messiah although it has become increasingly evident that with the passage of years the Torah will cease to exist and the religious community will disappear and observance of the Law will become untenable. Such an act, in my judgment, must be regarded as the height of impudence and self-destruction as well as deliberate repudiation of the Law. To be sure only God knows the true intention of this individual.

The fifth category deals with how one should regard himself during the days of apostasy. It is imperative that one who continues to live in a hostile environment for personal reasons or because of the dangers involved in travelling has to consider himself as close to being willfully guilty of desecrating God's name and contemptuous of the Almighty for which he is presently being punished. Nevertheless, he should keep in mind that by

performing even one of the *mitzvot* in this state of pseudo-apostasy, God will double his reward inasmuch as he did not do it for self-glory or out of fear but for the sake of God. And there is no comparison between the reward bestowed upon one for performing a *mitzvah* without fear and one who exposes himself to the danger of loss of life and possession. Indeed, it is for such an occasion that God exhorted us "to search for Him with all your heart and all your soul" (Deut. 4:29). Nevertheless we must do everything in our power and continually keep in mind to leave those regions which incurred God's wrath.

By the same token we should never alienate or despise the Sabbath violators, but, on the contrary, draw them nigh and inspire them to perform the *mitzvot*. As our sages indicated: "A willful transgressor who enters the synagogue to pray should not be disgraced but on the contrary be received with courtesy." They base their assertion on the words of Solomon who said: "Do not despise the thief if he steals . . ." (Prov. 6:30), which they interpret to mean "not to despise the transgressors who come secretly 'to steal' *mitzvot*."[15]

Manifestly, since we were expelled from our land, religious persecution has never ceased. "For from our youth we were brought up as we were from our father and guided as though sprung from our mother's womb."[16] The Talmud, however, states "a decree is likely to cease."[17] It is thus our hope that the Almighty will abolish religious persecution and establish in our day the promise: "In these days, at that time, saith the Lord, shall the iniquity of Israel be sought for and it shall not be there: and the sins of Judah and they shall not be found for I will pardon those whom I will leave remaining" (Jeremiah 50:20). So be it acceptable unto thee. Amen.

NOTES

1. The Islamic Calendar year *hegira* was 622 when Mohammed fled Mecca for Medina.

2. Two 15th century scholars of Algiers, Africa refer to Maimonides' epistle in their Responsa. *The Rivosh* — R. Yitzchak b. Sheishes — called it *Iggert*

ha Shemad. The *Rashbaz* — R. Shimon b. Zemach Duram — alluded to the letter as *Maamer Kiddush ha-Shem.*

3. The present persecution of the Almohades in distinction to the experiences in the days of Antioches.

4. B. Tal. *Rosh Hash.* 19a; *Taanit* 18a; *Megillah* 16a.

5. According to the *Hemdah Genuzah* edition reference is here to punishment by the government since no secret agents were appointed to spy after the pseudo-apostates.

Cf. *Hemdah Genuzah* which substitutes מונע for אשם.

However, the simple meaning as evident from the subsequent statement seems to be that reference here is to Divine guilt.

6. Cf. *Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah* (5:4), where Maimonides presents the opposite view.

כל מי שנאמר בו יעבור ואל יהרג ונהרג ולא עבר, הרי זה מתחייב בנפשו

This letter on *"Kiddush ha-Shem"* was probably the first work Maimonides put into writing when he was still a very young man. See Kafih's attempt in *Iggerot* at a reconciliation of both views (p. 118 note 87).

7. Carrying on the Sabbath is only a rabbinic injunction.

8. The ritual of "Ereb Tabshilein" permits the preparation of meals for the Sabbath on a festival occurring on Friday.

9. B. Tal. *B. Kama* 22b; *Gittin* 52b.

10. Cf. Kafih's version. He substitutes ערים for מדינות.

11. The source for this rabbinic statement is not clear. According to Kafih (p. 119, n. 93) reference here may be to "Pirke R. Eliezer," Ch. 26.

מבאן אמדו אם יש עשרה צדיקים במקום בצדקתם העולם עומד. שנ' ויאמר לא אשחית בעבור העשרה.

12. See Guide 11:42. He refers to David as a prophet.

13. He has reference to Morocco.

14. Mechilta, Exod. 13: Tosefta B. K. 87; Midrash Prov. 86.

15. Fishman — Maimon in his *Hayei Ha Rambam* (p. 19) asserts that this interpretation by the rabbis is not found anywhere in the *Sifre* or Midrashim available to us. Obviously Maimonides was in possession of a midrash lost to us.

16. This seems to be a paraphrase of a verse in Job (31:18).

17. See B. Tal. *Ketubot* 3b.